PREMILLENNIALISM

I. THE ISSUE

HARRIS FRANKLIN RALL, PH.D., D.D.

Professor of Systematic Theology in Garrett Biblical Institute
Evanston, Illinois

This is the first of three articles by Professor Rall. They form a notable contribution to the literature on their subject. As we have said before, if premillenarianism were simply a theological vagary we should not give it much attention. But it is more than a theological vagary. It declares itself to be the only true form of Christianity. As such it has important bearing upon the proper use of the Scriptures, the reasonableness of faith in a God who is a spirit, in fact in the entire conception of religion. Its injurious effect can already be seen in hundreds of churches throughout the United States.

Outside of certain circles, there has been in the church a strange lack of information concerning the modern premillennial movement. Not many have realized that, aside from the various Adventist denominations, there has been a concerted, vigorous, and well-financed propaganda in favor of this doctrine. Numerous Bible schools, popular Bible conferences and institutes, "prophetic conferences," numberless professional evangelists, tract and book circulation in great quantity, weekly and monthly periodicals, with an occasional independent church or mission, have been the agencies of this work. Of one volume several hundred thousand copies have been distributed, the book being mailed apparently to all the ministers of certain leading denominations throughout the country. Equally common is the failure to appreciate what this modern premillennialism really is. The issue, we are told by premillennialists, is simply one of a disputed order of events. All Christians hold to a

second coming of Jesus and a reign of righteousness and peace, a millennium. The premillennialists say Christ will come before the millennium, others say after it. But this statement is as far from revealing the real situation as is the popular impression that second adventism simply means that the world is about to come to an end.

The outline of the premillennial position can be briefly stated. (1) There is no hope for the world in this age. Its ruler is Satan. It is dominated by evil and destined to grow worse. No forces now at work (church, gospel, Holy Spirit) can save it. (2) The world will be saved when Jesus appears in visible form and at the head of armed forces, destroying some of his enemies and subjecting others, and assuming the position of ruler of the earth. (3) For a thousand years he is to reign at Jerusalem as the head of a Jewish world empire, his saints ruling under him, the restored Jewish nation of which he is the king holding a position

of supremacy, and all evil being suppressed.

This is premillennialism. It is no mere matter of an order of events. It is an answer to the problem of evil, the question how men can believe in a good God in a world where wrong seems triumphant. It is a doctrine of salvation, the promise of a new world and a theory as to how this new world is to come. And yet it is not one doctrine, but rather a whole system of theology. What we are to think of God and man, of sin and righteousness, of God's method with his world and his final purpose, all this is involved. In this paper the attention will be given to the central issue: How is the world to be saved, and what is this salvation to be? Or, in other words, how is the kingdom of God to be brought in and what will this kingdom be?

Premillennial Pessimism

To understand this premillennial doctrine we must first consider its estimate of the world as it now is, and of the spiritual forces which are at work in the world. That position can be put in the one word, pessimism. Chiliasm has a hope of the final triumph of good, but as regards this "age" and all that concerns it chiliasm means thoroughgoing pessimism. The prophet in all ages has been quick to see evil and courageous in its condemnation, nor has he ever minimized its power. He has refused to cry, "Peace, peace," when there was no peace. But premillennial pessimism is not a mark of moral discernment or especial sensi-

tiveness to sin. It is purely a dogmatic position. The first requirement of the premillennial position is the utter hopelessness of the present situation. The whole theory falls to the ground unless one holds that the world is evil and is constantly growing worse. "If we are mistaken as to the presence of a 'religious falling away,' then all hopes and arguments of premillennialism dissolve in thin air,"¹ confesses one writer.

It is no wonder then that the pages of these writers are filled with pictures of the blackest hue. There is no effort at a moral estimate of the world, and moral discrimination is quite lacking. The matter is as superficial as the optimism which they so often condemn. A recent writer, for example, calls his volume *Behold the Morning*, and then takes over a third of its space for a catalog of evils of every kind, quoting at length with apparent satisfaction the opinion that "the entire race will be insane in a few centuries." One looks through these pages in vain for any real recognition of the forces of good that are at work. The references to temperance reform, philanthropy, social legislation, or humanitarian movements of any kind are uniformly critical, depreciatory, or simply scornful. The possibility of any Christian elements in our civilization is scoffed at.

Our civilization was conceived in sin and born in iniquity. In Genesis 3 we have its conception, and in Genesis 4 its birth. Civilization took form when Cain, the rationalist and fratricide, "went out from the presence of the Lord . . . and builded a city."²

¹ Wimberly, *Behold the Morning*, p. 71; cf. *Prophetic Studies*, p. 166.

² *Christian Workers Magazine*, September, 1918.

As a matter of fact, the whole question for chiliasm is not one of what is, but of what must be. It rests back finally upon an ultra-Calvinistic conception of divine sovereignty. The world is evil and is growing worse because God has determined this as his plan. That plan is revealed in the Bible, and it is ours not to debate it but to accept it. God has said in the Bible that the world is to grow worse, and that decides it. The world itself is not now under God's control. "Satan is the arch enemy of God, and the world in this present evil age is in his power."¹ Since God has determined this as the course of events, we must not speak of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit as a failure. If God had wished to save the world in this age (instead of only a limited number, the elect) then it would have come to pass.² Quite consistently the writer just quoted adds that it is a mistake to preach the gospel of the kingdom in this age or to pray for its extension. It is ours simply to ask God to "accomplish the number of (his) elect."

We come then to the peculiar situation that hopelessness becomes a mark of faith, and the discovery of evil a ground of encouragement. Paul's word is reversed and we are summoned to rejoice over unrighteousness instead of with the truth, and by no means to believe all things or hope all things. It becomes a necessity to put the darkest construction upon all things as a support to this (assumed) divine plan. Dr. Nathanael West calls for a "treatise with full statistics of the

Devil's missions" in order to "set the word of God in its true light."³ And this strange situation makes possible the words of Dr. R. A. Torrey written during the war: "As awful as conditions are across the water today, and as awful as they may become in our own country, the darker the night gets, the lighter my heart gets."⁴ That is why premillennialism flourishes in times of greatest distress (witness the late war), and why progress of the good is the severest blow to the theory.

But premillennialism is something more than a belief in the power of evil and a despair as to the present age. It means despair as to the power of spiritual forces to redeem this world: in other words, moral pessimism. Consider what those forces of redemption are upon which thoughtful Christian men rely today. We believe in the power of the truth, coming to us supremely in the gospel and showing us the will of God and the true life of man. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the living God dwelling in His world and working in the life of men. We believe that this life of God in man is showing itself in love and service, in the passion for righteousness and the spirit of brotherhood. We believe that these forces are working, and will work, through the organized life of mankind in industry, in the state, and especially through the church of Christ. But always our fundamental confidence is in the power of the truth as given in the gospel, and the power of the Spirit of God in human life. Upon these spiritual forces we rely.

¹ Blackstone, *Jesus is Coming*, p. 143.

² *Christian Workers Magazine*, 1917, p. 278.

³ *The Thousand Years*, p. 449.

⁴ *Christian Workers Magazine*, 1917, p. 554.

Premillennialism declares that these spiritual forces cannot, or at least will not, save the world in this age or in any other. The failure of these forces is already apparent.

There is not a nation, or a country, or a parish, or a long-established congregation, where the devil has not more subjects than Christ.¹

If there were not some way beside the present religious propaganda for bringing in the kingdom of God, I could not believe in a scheme that has failed as this has and is certainly failing.²

The church is constantly depicted in blackest colors, and W. E. Blackstone is mild in comparison with others when he suggests that it is almost ready to be spued out of the Master's mouth.³

As to the state, not only are there no Christian nations but there can be none.⁴ As for the idea of a social Christianity, a spirit of righteousness leavening or molding society, that is absolutely rejected.

The uplift of society as a whole is a perversion of gospel salvation, which is purely individualistic.⁵

The leavening power of evil is insisted upon as strongly as the same power is denied to the good.

Here again the position is strictly dogmatic. It is not that these forces have not saved the world; they cannot. It is the old apocalyptic idea of a history that has been mapped out in advance, with its program of epochs and events. The program for this age includes simply the saving of a number of the elect out

of the wreck of the world. The work of the church and the effect of the gospel are strictly limited to this. The church that assumes to convert the world to Christ "proposes to itself a plan which already the mouth of God has declared to be false."⁶ The gospel "shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all nations." This is the passage constantly cited, and always we are told that it does not mean converting or Christianizing the world. One looks in vain for any explanation of Matt. 28:19, 20, where the command is to "make disciples of all the nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you." In brief, God has no intention of saving the world by spiritual means. The kingdom will not come, says A. C. Gaebelein flatly, in a spiritual way.⁷

Premillennial Militarism

What then are the forces to which premillennialism appeals in its hope of a new world? It must be answered, the physical and external. It is essentially a militaristic scheme of salvation. What other alternative is there? There are only two forces available in the world. The one is ethical and spiritual, God's Spirit appealing by the truth and working through the mind and heart of man. The other is external and physical. There is no third. Chiliasm definitely repudiates the former. It takes the highest spiritual forces that Christianity knows, and says positively that these cannot save the world. There

¹ Ryle, *Second Coming*, p. 40.

² Wimberly, *Behold the Morning*, p. 210.

³ *Jesus is Coming*, p. 95.

⁴ *Christian Workers Magazine*, 1917, p. 277.

⁵ *Christian Workers Magazine*, XVI, 396.

⁶ West, *The Thousand Years*, p. 279.

⁷ *Harmony*, p. 186.

is nothing left to it but the physical, and to this specifically it appeals. True it claims to appeal to Christ, through whose second coming the kingdom is to be established. But this is not the Christ whom the church through all the ages has preached to men as their Savior. It is not the Jesus of Nazareth revealed in the gospels, the teacher of truth, the bearer of love and grace. It is rather an oriental monarch, a vengeful militaristic chief. The Jewish ideal at its lowest, repudiated by Jesus, is here made the final hope of mankind.

What we have indicated, millennial writers frankly avow. "Whenever the kingdom of heaven is set up over this world, it will be through miraculous power,"¹ declares Dr. C. I. Scofield. "Only suppose God to act irresistibly, and the thing is done,"² says J. F. Silver. The author quotes here as Wesley's opinion an idea which Wesley propounded only to repudiate. There is no moral qualification here, no question of man's response to the appeal of God; it is a matter of sheer omnipotence, of bald sovereignty. So J. H. Brookes says plainly as to the salvation of the Jews, that while "their dispersion is conditional, made to depend upon their obedience, . . . their restoration is unconditional, made to depend upon his sovereign grace and unchangeable purpose."³ So evil is to be overcome by the same irresistible power. "The fundamental idea of a reign, according to God, is the repression of evil."⁴ "Not

a single prophecy can be adduced which predicts the conversion of the world by the gradual diffusion of the gospel," says Brookes. His conception of the method of making a new world is seen by the quotations to which he appeals, all of which naturally are to be taken in the strict literalness insisted upon by this school. The better age is to come "with dreadful judgments." "The indignation of the Lord is upon all nations, and his fury upon all their armies." "By fire and by his sword will the Lord plead with all flesh." "And the slain of the Lord shall be at that day from one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth: they shall not be lamented, neither gathered, nor buried; they shall be dung upon the ground." Special attention is called to the "slaughter so terrible that the armor taken from the battlefield will supply fuel for seven years."⁵

The rectifying which comes at last is not by mercy but by judgment—not by an extension of the gospel, the labour of ministers, or any gracious instrumentality whatsoever now at work.⁶

The progress of Christianity is the progress of a Mighty Prince The conversion of "the peoples" is to be accomplished by the "declaration of his mighty acts." The presence of Christ is that alone which can secure the victory. It is quite unwarrantable to explain this by saying that the blessing is to be wrought out by the pacific doctrine and institutions with which Christ endowed the Church eighteen centuries ago.⁷

¹ *The Coming and Kingdom of Christ*, p. 114.

² *The Lord's Return*, p. 35.

⁴ J. M. Gray, *Mountain Peaks of Prophecy*, p. 53.

⁶ McNeile, quoted by Brown, *Second Advent*, p. 328.

⁷ West, *The Thousand Years*, p. 455.

³ *The Lord Cometh*, p. 397.

⁵ *The Lord Cometh*, pp. 287–99, *passim*.

Few writers are quite so frank or brutal as I. M. Haldeman, whose work on *The Coming of Christ* is distributed by the Bible House of Los Angeles for propaganda purposes. He translates this millennial militarism into a picture of the returning Christ coming as a great military leader, striking down his enemies and killing them with the sword as men of war have always done, with the eyes of one who is aroused and indignant, in whose veins beats the pulse of a hot anger. . . . He comes forth as one who no longer seeks either friendship or love. . . . His garments are dipped in blood, the blood of others. He descends that he may shed the blood of men. . . . He will enunciate his claim by terror and might. He will write it in the blood of his foes. He comes like the treader of the winepress, and the grapes are the bodies of men. He will tread and trample in his fury till the blood of men shall fill the earth. . . . He will tread and trample them beneath his accusing feet, till their up-spurting blood shall make him crimson. . . . He comes to his glory not as the Savior, meek and lowly, not through the suffrage of willing hearts and the plaudits of a welcoming world, but as a king, an autocrat, a despot, through the gushing blood of a trampled world. And those who follow this emergent, wrathful King of Heaven . . . are represented as armies. They come forth as a body of fighters. They come forth to assist the Warrior to make war on the earth. In this way the kingdom is to come, not by the preaching of the Gospel and the all-persuasive power of the Spirit of God.¹

This is the gospel of militarism proclaimed by millennialism as the world's hope over against the gospel of grace. And this it offers, at the close of the

world's most terrible war, to a world weary of the sword and needing above all else the good news of the cross, not only as the wisdom but as the power of God. It has surrendered all hope that this world may be saved by grace and truth and love. Its sole appeal now is to force.

And here millennialism faces a dilemma which it has never solved. Is this force purely destructive, or can it really save men? Force can easily enough destroy, that is clear, and millennialism can picture plainly enough a supernatural War Lord destroying his opponents. But is that all? If so, then millennialism has not solved the problem of the world's salvation but has simply given it up. But if not, the harder question remains: How can mere force create righteousness? How can the physical create the spiritual? For we must remember the insistent statement that it is not spiritually, not by the gospel of grace or any other agency now at work, that the kingdom of righteousness is to be established. The Jews, of course, are to be converted; that is settled and without condition. The only answer is the recourse to an idea of divine sovereignty that out-Calvins Calvin. Brookes asserts this. The whole matter rests upon God's "sovereign grace and unchangeable purpose." Of course, there will be repentance and holiness, but there is no question as to these since the same sovereign power will supply faith, repentance, and holiness together with the restoration of their land.²

Not materially different is the stress that is often laid upon the effect of the

¹ Haldeman, chap. xvii.

² *The Lord Cometh*, pp. 396, 397.

visible appearance of Jesus. This is appealed to in order to explain how those who have been obdurate to every plea of the gospel are to be won over to Christ. The visible splendor of Jesus, the glory and majesty of his appearance in power, are to overawe, to confound, and to convert where in times past love and truth have failed. By this means the Jews and some of the nations are to be saved. This does not, of course, fit in with the declarations that Jesus is to come not with grace but solely in judgment. But, leaving this aside, the same difficulty reappears. Here again is the appeal to the physical by men who have lost faith in the spiritual. The Jesus of the gospels who saw in the lust for signs the mark of an evil and adulterous generation, who bade men be silent when he healed them, who wanted a faith that sprang from inner conviction, gives place here to one who seeks to win by dazzling the eyes and overwhelming by physical splendor. Paul's position must be reversed; the world is to be saved, not by Christ crucified, but by the signs which the Jews sought, and salvation is no longer by faith but by sight.

The Millennium—a Jewish State

The discussion of means has brought us now to the final issue, that of the end. What kind of a kingdom is this to which millennialism looks forward? The question is one upon which we rarely get definite statements. We are told in general terms that it is to be a kingdom of universal peace and righteousness, in which all the hopes of mankind are

to be satisfied. A closer examination of premillennial teaching, however, reveals something quite different.

First of all, this millennial kingdom is a political institution. It is an earthly, visible, political throne which Jesus takes. Jesus is to be the world's supreme civil ruler, reigning just as Saul and David did.¹ We are to expect exactly what the Jews looked forward to, their mistake being simply a matter of date. The essence of the kingdom is not anything spiritual, not "forgiveness of sins, conversion, the gift of the Holy Spirit"; it is just that political state of which the Old Testament speaks, "a literal kingdom, which has for its seat Jerusalem."²

The kingdom will be a Jewish state. The promises made to the Jews in the Old Testament are absolute and unconditioned, and will all be literally fulfilled. Jesus himself is to "fight for them in the day of battle and slay all their enemies."³ The nations that are not destroyed are to be subject to the Jews. Dr. Torrey insists that all prophecy is to be "exactly and literally fulfilled," and refers specifically to passages like Isa. 49:22, 23, and 66:20. According to this the Jews (good and bad, no distinction is made) are to be brought back to Jerusalem upon horses and mules and dromedaries, in litters and chariots, the nations all helping. Then the kings and the queens from all these lands (democracy apparently is but a temporary stage) will offer themselves as personal servants and nurse-maids to the returned Jews, and indeed will bow down and lick the dust of their

¹ *Prophetic Studies*, p. 143.

² Gaebelein, *Harmony*, p. 160.

³ Seiss, *Last Times*, p. 224.

feet. After this we are not surprised that in 1917 Dr. J. M. Gray, passing by Belgium and Serbia and France and all the rest, declared that "the trouble in the whole gentile world today is attributable to the treatment of the Jew."

With this Jewish state goes naturally a Jewish religion, or at least a Judaized Christianity. While some earlier chiliasts were more cautious here, the leaders of the modern movement are outspoken; whether their followers realize what this position means is another matter. The distinctive elements of Christianity as we know it are dropped: the church disappears, there is no preaching of the gospel. But Judaism in all its ancient practices is restored. The temple is to be rebuilt at Jerusalem, altars are to smoke again, and the blood of victims innumerable is to flow. "There can be no doubt about the restoration of the Sabbath (meaning the Jewish Sabbath) during the millennial age," writes Dr. C. I. Scofield with the approbation of the editors in the journal which officially represents the Moody Bible School, at the same time predicting "the restoration of all the fundamental institutions of Israel."¹ Indeed, the ceremonial and sacrifice are to exceed anything that Israel ever knew in the old days, for most of these writers hold that the elaborate provisions of Ezekiel 40 to 48 are to be literally carried out. So Dr. Scofield, W. E. B. in *Jesus is Coming*, Professor Russell of the Moody School at the Prophetic Conference of 1914, A. C. Gaebelein, and others

assert. Dr. Torrey holds to the same renewal of sacrifices and insists, as others do, that once a year all the people of the earth are to travel to Jerusalem and keep the feast of tabernacles.

Clearly, the revival of Judaism is not conceived as an incidental matter concerning the Jews alone. It is a divinely intended consummation, and for the whole race. Jerusalem is the world-center of religion as of politics. The supreme religious event in this millennial kingdom, the occasion which is to bring the whole world together every year for a whole week, is the feast of tabernacles, whose central feature is the daily slaughter of kids and rams, lambs and bullocks. The Christian age, the age of the gospel, becomes an "interregnum," an "incident,"² with scorn and contempt heaped equally upon Christian church and the state.³ Christianity as we have it is not the complete fulfilment of the Old Testament.⁴ The higher stage is not Christianity but this completed Judaism, in which the distinctive Jewish elements, political and religious, come to the fore. In the place of a religion that is universal and spiritual, we have the nationalism which Jesus repudiated and the ceremonialism which Paul denounced.

Finally, the kingdom of these modern millennialists represents the triumph of force and the principle of autocracy. That judgment is not changed by the fact that this is supposed to be divine force and the rule a divine autocracy. We have seen that, having discredited

¹ *Christian Workers Magazine*, XVI, 471.

² West, *The Thousand Years*.

³ *Ibid.*, Part XI.

⁴ Griffith-Thomas in *Christian Workers Magazine*, XVII, 13.

every ethical and spiritual agency, millennialism had recourse to external means to bring in the new age. But physical force cannot produce spiritual results; only that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. The kingdom which "does not come by spiritual means" cannot be spiritual. There is only one kingdom (rule) of Christ, and that is the rule of an indwelling and controlling spirit. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." And what is true in the case of one man is true in relation to government or society. It is true that millennialists speak occasionally of an effusion of the Spirit in the new age, but the one new power that comes into play, the one instrument to which appeal is constantly made, is visible manifestation and physical force.

This character of the kingdom is clearly indicated by recognized premillennial leaders. Dr. C. I. Scofield speaks of Christ as "reigning with a rod of iron." "There cannot in that age be any 'unbelievers' on earth. . . . But there will be those who, hating God, sullenly obey Christ the king."¹ "We may say we need a great democracy. . . . What we need is an emperor that will bring peace, and that is not Kaiser Wilhelm, it is Kaiser Jesus," says Dr. Torrey. Here again the issue is plain. Democracy stands for the rule of principles in the free life of the people; Dr. Torrey's only hope is in the compulsion of autocratic power. Quite consistently he suggests a return to the theocratic organization of Israel with judges as rulers.² With Dean

Gray of the Moody School we find the same idea. "The fundamental idea of a reign, according to God, is the repression of evil. . . . While during that period Christ will be obeyed and served by the nations, yet to no small extent it will be on their part a feigned obedience and an unwilling service." Dr. Gray's reference to Zech. 14:16-19 indicates his idea: The nations will all go to Jerusalem for the annual feast of tabernacles, yet it will be largely religious pretense due to their fear of famine and plague.³ There will, of course, be true saints in the earth, men born of the Spirit, but the new and distinctive element again is not a new spirit of love and righteousness overcoming evil, but mere external power repressing it.

This then is the kingdom to which chiliasm bids us look forward. It is not the reign of an inner spirit which has transformed the hearts of men. There is no real overthrow of sin, for that can come only by a spiritual redemption, by the entrance of a new life into the heart. What we have is a great military revolution in which the saints under their leader are successful. Now they occupy the places of rule. Outward opposition is put down though sin still remains, with whole nations only outwardly submissive. A military victory, an autocratic reign, a Jesus content to restrain rebellious peoples by threat, where he has not already slain them by the sword, and to accept a pretended obedience; and a new and more terrible rebellion to close it all: this is the premillennial kingdom.

¹ *Sunday School Times*, June 17, 1916.

² *Christian Workers Magazine*, XVII, 554, 471.

³ *Mountain Peaks of Prophecy*, pp. 53-55.